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AUTHOR Albert, Walter
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ABSTRACT

The evolution and activities of the Allegheny Foreign Language Association (AFLA) are described in the context of the organization of foreign language education in the area and the attitudes of the professionals involved. Foreign language instruction in Allegheny County includes: Pittsburgh public school programs, including elementary magnet bilingual education programs in French, Spanish, and German; the University of Pittsburgh; two other universities; four private colleges; several private secondary schools noted for their foreign language programs; suburban secondary schools; and an extensive parochial school system. Despite efforts at communication in the foreign language community, little contact occurred, and wariness and resentment between elementary/secondary and higher education persisted. Although the University of Pittsburgh sponsored some significant professional activities, it also abolished the foreign language graduation requirement, causing more problems. AFLA began meeting in the summer of 1983, and some significant changes in attitude may have begun. The university has implemented both entrance and graduation requirements in foreign languages, and projects have been discussed such as establishing a resource center and inservice teacher education programs. It is suggested that much work is still necessary, but greater potential for interprofessional cooperation now exists. (MSE)

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Walter Albert
Department of French and Italian
1328 C. L.
University of Pittsburgh
Pittsburgh, PA 15260

Foreign Language Networking in Southwestern Pennsylvania

Pittsburgh, with its population of 500,000 and a metropolitan area of some million and a half inhabitants, has undergone a series of downtown rehabilitation projects over the last 20 years: Renaissance I and Renaissance II are about to be succeeded by Renaissance III, leaving one to wonder how many rebirths can be midwived by the local politicians, architects and contractors before the city is officially declared reborn. Despite this brick-and-mortar revitalization, however, Pittsburgh has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country. It is also a city with large ethnic populations--a natural base, one might assume, for the study of foreign languages. In the past several years, the Pittsburgh public schools, beset by defections to the private and parochial schools as the quality of public education was perceived to be declining rapidly, have instituted (on the model of systems like those in Cincinnati) a number of magnet schools with specialized programs. The success of these magnets is beginning to effect changes in enrollment patterns in the public and private schools.

There are now three bilingual programs in the elementary schools--programs in French, Spanish and German--and within the next two years the programs in Kindergarten-through-Grade 5 schools will link up with the language programs in the middle and high schools. For the first time in its history, a school system in the city of Pittsburgh will have a comprehensive foreign language program in which students study traditional subjects in a foreign language at all levels.

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Although the Pittsburgh Board of Education sits massively across the street from the neo-Gothic structure somewhat portentously called the "Cathedral of Learning" and housing the administrative center of the University of Pittsburgh, the two systems might just as well have been located at opposite ends of the country for all of the communication that existed between them. I cannot imagine that the situation is much different in many other co-existing secondary and college/university systems across the country, but in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County, this self-defeating and mutually unproductive indifference has seriously damaged the formation of educationally coherent systems.

In addition to the Pittsburgh city school system and the University of Pittsburgh, Allegheny County is the home of Carnegie-Mellon and Duquesne Universities, Carlow, Chatham, Point Park, and Seton Hill Colleges, several private secondary schools noted for the excellence of their foreign language programs, a number of suburban secondary school systems and a thriving and extensive parochial school system. There are foreign language programs in all of these systems, none of them as comprehensive as the city's ambitious bilingual magnet programs, and the University of Pittsburgh offers the only doctoral programs in foreign languages in the area. Contacts among university faculties have been encouraged in recent years by the formation of the Pittsburgh Council on Higher Education, but it will not surprise foreign language educators to learn that the foreign language programs and teachers were not seen as essential components and were largely ignored.

It goes without saying that a great deal of the blame for the continuation of that situation rested on the foreign language teachers; we have usually cultivated our own gardens and, good internationalists that we

are, found more exotic flowers for tending than those in our back yard. A curious paradox has always existed in that we, who are the true citizens of the world and the promoters of intercultural communication, have found it almost impossible to communicate with our colleagues in other departments at the universities and completely unable to see that the quality of our programs is dependent to an enormous extent upon the quality of the teaching in the local secondary schools from which the majority of our students come. We have complained about the ill-prepared students, publicly denounced the decline in quality of the public school systems, and refused to recognize our failure, as taxpayers and citizens in those communities from which we draw our students, to support our colleagues in the secondary schools.

The group of interested and concerned faculty at the colleges and universities and the public and parochial schools who put together a proposal for the National Endowment for the Humanities grant administered by the University of Pennsylvania was composed largely of people unknown to one another and with liberal doses of suspicion, wariness and resentment, particularly on the part of secondary school teachers angry from years of both neglect and criticism on the part of their colleagues in the so-called higher-learning institutions.

The initial reaction was predictable:

"Where's the money?"

"What makes you think I have time for this sort of thing?"

"What's in it for me?"

The proposal was, nevertheless, submitted and accepted, and something we finally decided to call AFLA, the Allegheny Foreign Language Association, began to meet early in the summer of 1983.

What has happened over the past six months has not been spectacular and could, I suppose, be seen as downright discouraging. The steering committee, with representatives from each of the foreign language departments in the colleges and universities, parochial, public and suburban school systems, has realized that its first task is to move the focus away from the small group and to begin to involve our colleagues at all levels in activities that the group will see as productive and that will do a number of things: to keep professional communication/dialogue going--since if we cannot talk to one another, we are not going to talk very effectively to those constituencies that we must reach and engage if we are to accomplish anything--and to translate that dialogue into projects that will promote our programs and support teachers in the classroom at all levels.

We have had two things going for us since, in those years of indifference of which I have spoken, the "divorce" was not final. First, a joint appointment was made at the University of Pittsburgh in Arts and Sciences and the School of Education for a linguistics specialist who had also taught French and Spanish in the public schools. And, second, the annual AATF grand concours has, for the last five years, been administered by university faculty.

Some of us had talked with teachers from the public schools; we had been visited by some classes, and we had at least recognized that we shared common interests. But in 1969 when the University abolished its foreign language graduation requirement, it sent a clear message to teachers and, certainly to administrators who controlled the school budgets, that foreign languages were not essential to the liberal arts program.

Of course, other requirements were abolished, but the damage seems to me

to have been particularly serious in foreign language departments and to the teaching of foreign languages in the schools. At that time, Pitt was still drawing fairly substantially from outside Western Pennsylvania. That was not to be true much longer, and today our undergraduates come largely from the immediate area and they are coming from programs influenced by the kinds of signals we sent more than a decade ago.

I am delighted that this fall an upgraded foreign language entrance requirement will be implemented along with a two-term graduation requirement, and--for the first time in many years--some attention is being paid to our programs. In fact--the bane of every administrator's day--we are perceived as needing increased staffing. The effect on the secondary schools has been dramatic in terms of support for advanced language courses--(the entrance requirement is for three years of a foreign language)--and in student enrollments. The new distribution requirements at Pitt are complicated and the effect will not be known for some time, but there will undoubtedly be shifts in enrollment patterns.

This advantage is not perceived as benefitting equally all the languages: Slavic, Chinese and Japanese and German are not sure where they will fit in the new context and, as one might expect, AFLA is largely dominated by teachers of French and Spanish. Still, what is exciting about this is that some major changes in attitudes toward the languages are perhaps beginning to occur, and it is an opportune time for the cooperative efforts that we hope to get out of committee and into some kind of action. The last open meeting of AFLA drew about 35 teachers, and a number of sub-groups formed to work on such activities as:

--the development of a resource center for teaching materials with evaluations of texts, course syllabi, tapes, and films;

--the attempt to establish college-credit courses for teachers with the granting of inservice credits by the school systems;

--the support of an International Governorship Summer Workshop on the model of the other workshops which already exist in some areas and which bring together the most talented students from across the state each summer;

--the scheduling of summer workshops for teachers on such subjects as broad-based competency exams and interviewing techniques;

--and, no less important, the formation of a political action network to reach legislators who--even now, in the Pennsylvania House and Senate--are considering bills for mandated graduation requirements of which a component could be a foreign language requirement. (Lest there be dancing in the aisles, let me state that the latest version contains a statement that only recommends a foreign language as "desirable.")

All of these good intentions are nebulous enough at this point to warrant a fair amount of skepticism about their realization. But if one can have a building renaissance in Pittsburgh, I should like to think that there could also be an educational renaissance--one that would bring together teachers who understand that, whatever level of a foreign language or literature we teach, our goals are shared ones and that only in true integration will we hope to achieve them.

I attended a meeting in early December at which the new provost at the University spoke to the Humanities Council. One of the things he said--and to

which I replied rather testily to set the record momentarily straight--was that our departments of foreign languages are staffed largely by literature specialists and we are, therefore, ill-equipped to teach language. This is, of course, something we hear constantly. But what good teacher of literature has not had a solid grounding in the language, often with strong linguistics training as well, has not spent considerable time in one or more foreign countries, and does not, every day of his teaching life, understand that language and literature are inseparable and that--whatever the course name--one is always teaching language?

Some say that those of us who have not had recent training in new linguistics methodology are not up-to-date and should probably retreat to our literature courses and let the language teachers do what they do best. My reply is that I am suspicious of anyone who claims to be a teacher and to have a bias against either language or literature. We should all do both with some grace and skill, and I do not need to point out that if there are critics of the teaching of language, the teachers of literature have not done remarkably well in the last decade. Perhaps your experience is different from ours, but our language courses--taught by so-called literature specialists--are very successful and the literature classes are shrinking. That, too, is something with which AFLA will attempt to deal.

Many faculty are disgrunted these days--literature Ph.D.s who see declining graduate programs and growing undergraduate programs and wonder where the summer grants, the travel money for conventions, and subsidies for typing and offprints, and interest in their speciality have gone. I have no ready answer for that, but I doubt that the worst dream of some of my colleagues will ever be realized and that they will spend their twilight years

teaching only elementary and intermediate French. I might point out that the secondary school teachers have been doing it for years and some of them still live full and rewarding lives. The drift toward fragmentation and defeat must be arrested, and teachers must see their function as part of a larger system that is not local or parochial. The integration and strengthening of existing programs is something we should work at constantly and if we do not believe in it and achieve it, the next decade will be a mirror image of the '70s, which--I would imagine most foreign language teachers will agree--was not the profession's finest hour.